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ABSTRACT

The advent of writing-across-the-curriculum programs at the college level has necessitated the development of institutional measurement schema to internally assess their pedagogical and curricular efficacy and to externally demonstrate to concerned constituents that specific institutions are effectively fulfilling the educational mission for writing instruction. Following a process of writing reform that not only changed course requirements but also educated faculty in all disciplines, Westminster College has developed a writing assessment program consisting of four major components. First is a series of formal writing assessment sessions for which students read articles and write essays about them. They are administered at three critical points in the student's academic career: the beginning of the freshman year; at the end of the first fall semester; and after the student has taken the academic writing course at the end of the Sophomore year. Next comes a portfolio containing 10 written items spanning the student's entire academic career and including a wide range of types of writing. The third component consists of departmental assessment programs, which employ a broad selection of assessment activities, ranging from department portfolios to case studies to senior capstone projects. The fourth component is informational assessment, which consists of a collection of interviews with students in the portfolio sample and with faculty at the end of each academic year. The number of students included in the sampling is about 200. (Contains evaluative schema, departmental guidelines, and an assessment descriptive features grid.) (TB)

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THE WESTMINSTER WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM: A MODEL FOR SMALL COLLEGES

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The advent of writing-across-the curriculum programs at the college level has necessitated the development of institutional measurement schema to internally assess their pedagogical and curricular efficacy and to externally demonstrate to concerned constituencies that specific institutions are efficiently and effectively fulfilling the educational mission for writing instruction. These developments point up the increasing need for small colleges with WAC programs in place or in process, especially those colleges who depend upon the vicissitudes of private funding, to devise assessment protocol which measure writing as a complex, multi-faceted activity which takes place in contexts that are unique to the small college environment. Such contexts include: a favorable student-teacher ratio, an intensive focus upon personalized instruction, a significant emphasis upon interdisciplinary learning, and an environment in which faculty may more easily model their critical thinking and writing processes in individual and collective scholarly contexts. Westminster College serves as a useful example of just such a small college environment.

Westminster is a small, liberal arts college in Fulton, Missouri. At present, our total enrollment ranges between 675-750 students, who are taught by a group of 58 full- and part-time faculty. The college annually enrolls about 200 freshman students, most of whom have ACT or SAT test scores above the 75th

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percentile. Westminster faculty typically expect students to exhibit a high level of academic ability in their classwork. At a faculty meeting in 1989, (which was, in fact, my first faculty meeting) many faculty expressed their growing frustration at the lack of evidence of critical thinking and writing skills in a group of students who ostensibly possessed, if the standardized test scores and other such measures could be believed, a wide range of high-level skills. They complained that the English Department was simply not doing a good job of teaching students to write.

In response to this dissatisfaction, a committee of Westminster faculty and students composed of representatives from each of the three academic divisions--humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and math--investigated the teaching and learning environments on campus. The Dean of Faculty, who had formed the committee, continued to participate in our inquiry as an ex-officio administrative member of the committee. We conducted interviews with faculty and students focused upon how critical thinking and writing were taught and learned, and we collected course syllabi to gather multiple supportive data.

In brief, we found that at least half of the faculty employed a lecture-based learning model which centered authority exclusively in the professor. Within this model, writing served only as a means for students to regurgitate information gleaned from lectures, in papers and in essay examinations. In addition, when these faculty assigned and evaluated student writing, their assignments reflected a lack of consideration for the

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purpose of and audience for the writing, and an evaluative stance which focused on the maintenance of high standards of formal correctness. The remainder of the faculty attempted to creatively incorporate writing into their disciplinary pedagogies, but all expressed the need for more knowledge of composition theory to provide a basis for curricular coherence.

Our fact-finding mission led us to begin the development of the writing-across-the-curriculum program in 1990. I organized an intensive, year-long seminar in composition and critical thinking theory and pedagogy for the members of the committee. And it was indeed an intensive experience. I placed a wide array of composition texts on reserve for faculty use, and provided the Dean of Faculty with individual copies. In often-animated discussions which emerged from their reading, faculty debated their widely-divergent views concerning how writing and critical thinking should be defined within a college setting, exactly what writing instruction should help students accomplish, and how curricula to bring about such goals should be constructed.

Moreover, my colleagues arrived at the concensus that faculty should no longer exclusively depend upon the two required freshman composition courses, or the faculty who taught them, to completely instruct students in critical thinking and writing. And they had acquired the appropriate knowledge base to construct coherent discipline-based and interdisciplinary curricula, integrating writing as an instrument of exploration and learning.

I want to emphasize at this point that it is crucial to

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actively involve those individuals or groups who are stake-holders in writing and critical thinking instruction--students, faculty, administration--in curriculum design and evaluation. And indeed it is often easier to assemble such a representative group of stakeholders at a small college, in which there are fewer layers of bureaucracy to wade through, than at larger institutions.

Members of the faculty committee used these curricula which they had designed to demonstrate to the faculty at large and to other concerned constituencies (Board of Trustees, administration, students, parents, alumni, employers) how such uses of writing could sharpen our students' critical thinking skills, improve the quality of their writing, promote active learning by moving faculty away from the lecture-oriented learning model, encourage curricular coherence, resurrect some beleaguered faculty from the mid-career burnout of a 4/4 teaching load, and mediate the disciplinary isolation experienced by both students and faculty (an isolation that had resulted from an earlier period of academic turf warfare during the 1970s when dispersal of meager funding to departments depended in large part upon the number of departmental graduates).

Moreover, this process of curricular reform which preceded the establishment of the writing assessment program resulted in a more coherent, campus-wide vision of the aims and goals of writing instruction. Most notably, the English Department completely restructured the composition requirement, replacing the two-course required composition sequence with one four-hour required

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composition course, ENG 103--Academic Writing, which focuses upon preparing students for writing in all academic disciplines by exploring the conventions of various discourse communities. The course emphasizes the critical processes of summary, synthesis, analysis, and argumentation in a developmental sequence, treating reading, writing, and critical thinking as integrated skills. In support of this course, the English Department published a rhetorical reference work, Academic Writing At Westminster College, to communicate the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions for the course's structure as well as a narrative definition of critical terms. From thoughful considerations, such as this one, emerged the inventory of outcomes upon which the writing assessment program is based.

The Westminster Writing Assessment Program consists of four major components: 1) a series of formal writing assessment sessions during the freshman and sophomore years; 2) a college portfolio, containing written work spanning the student's entire academic career; 3) departmental assessment programs; and 4) an informational support assessment. The aim of the assessment program is to determine, by means of descriptive evaluation, if students' writing experiences within the college curricula cultivate the range and level of critical thinking and writing skills that such curricula are intended to develop, or, to use Richard Larson's phrasing, are we making a difference?

The assessment program focuses principally on curricular evaluation and improvement rather than on individual student performance. It is what Grant Wiggins has termed "authentic

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assessment." We view assessment as the task of assembling the parts of a meaningful text that represents a broad inventory of learning as well as more in-depth representative sampling. The Assessment Committee, which is composed of an administrative representative, faculty and students, identified a five-point evaluative schema for writing in the college curricula: 1) the writing curriculum should promote the goals set forth in the mission statement of the college, which asserts that "it is essential for the educated individual to be able to read critically, to think logically, to judge objectively, to discern relationships, and to express one's thoughts clearly and cogently"; 2) the writing curriculum structure should be developmentally sequenced to expose students to a systematic means of learning the activities of thinking and writing; 3) the writing curriculum should reinforce the interdisciplinary content of the liberal arts by promoting meaningful inquiry and discovery; 4)the writing curriulum should be based upon coherent theories of reading, writing, and critical thinking; 5) the writing curriculum should emphasize summary, synthesis, analysis, and argumentation as essential approaches to comprehend and express one's thoughts and experiences.

I. Writing Assessment Sessions

The writing assessment sessions elicit a descriptive profile of student learning. These sessions occur at three critical points in a student's academic career: the beginning of the freshman year, as a baseline description of initial skills; at the end of the fall semester of the freshman year, after the

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student has taken ENG 103 Academic Writing, and at the end of the sophomore year, after the student has completed the two required writing intensive courses and before the student declares a major field of study. The writing prompts for these sessions are designed to encourage students to use the range of critical thinking and writing skills identified in the evaluative schema as essential to the College's mission statement.

Incoming first-year students must take the Freshman Seminar, an interdisciplinary introduction to college learning and critical thinking, during the fall semester. The initial writing assessment session takes place during the Freshman Seminar orientation week preceding the start of classes. The writing prompts are distributed to all 200 students in the Friday large group session. The prompt handout contains the selected reading, the statement of the writing task (including the audience and purpose for the writing), and a page which explains the writing process in detail. During the intervening week, the students are encouraged to read the selected text critically, take notes on the reading, and work through three drafts of the essay. The students' progress is monitored by the Freshman Seminar faculty, many of whom participated in the seminar on composition theory and pedagogy, and now teach writing intensive courses. Students' academic honesty is governed by the college honor code.

Another large group session convenes on the following Friday, the Friday before classes begin. During this 75-minute session, each student writes a reflective essay about his/her reading, writing, and thinking processes. The students are

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encouraged to pay conscious attention to these processes during the course of the preceding week as they occur in preparation for this writing session. At the conclusion of the session, students submit all notes and drafts of the prompted essay, and all drafts of the reflective essay in folders provided by the college.

A team of faculty readers, chosen to equally represent academic division, academic discipline, faculty rank, and gender categories, and who have received training in holistic evaluation then meet in a six-hour session, for which they are paid $20 per hour, to read and descriptively evaluate a random sample of 100 student folders. Readers use the Westminster Writing Assessment Descriptive Features Grid to profile each student folder, which is identified by code to ensure confidentiality. The grid, which contains a series of features statements about writing, is modelled on Richard Larson's 1991 Inventory of Discourse Acts, used in the portfolio portion of the FIPSE Project. The grid cotnains two response columns--the first column, in which a checkmark is placed to confirm the presence of the individual feature in the student's text, and the second column for brief evaluator comments regarding the particular student's expression of the feature. I want to express my appreciation to Dick Larson for providing professional support and persuasive consultation with administrators as we developed the assessment program.

The remaining two writing assessment sessions follow the format outlined above. The session at the end of the first

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semester occurs during a multiple-section final exam period which is specifically set aside for this purpose. The session at the end of the sophomore year occurs on a college-wide assessment day devoted exclusively to testing. Students are required to participate in the writing assessment sessions as a condition of graduation. They receive notation on their official transcipts of completion of this requirement. Faculty and students market completion of the writing assessment requirement to lower-division students as a means to document and foreground their learning and expertise to graduate schools and to potential employers.

II. Portfolio Assessment

The portfolio component of the assessment program retains the disciplinary nature of academic writing while allowing us to gather more than one type of writing. The rationale for this application of portfolios is based upon five assumptions:

1. A portfolio will contain more texts, thereby providing more evidence and therefore a broader base for accurate and equitable judgement of student writing.

2. A portfolio includes texts of more than one type. A variety of texts will lead to a broader basis fo making judgements regarding student writing and the learning it reflects. Such a variety of texts also permits the evaluator an opportunity to incorporate student reflection on the writing and learning processes into the evaluation process.

3. A portfolio will allow ease and consistency of monitoring the development of a student's writing and the ability to improve his

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or her own quality of writing. Each portfolio thus represents the range and quality of individual student writing.

4. A portfolio allows both instructors and evaluators to take into account pedagogical and curricular values more directly by means of the type and range of texts we choose to collect and by the patterns we look for in those texts.

5. Portfolio assessment will aid in building consensus among faculty within and across disciplines regarding writing instruction and assessment, a condition that particularly applies to the small college setting. The portfolio method will serve multiple functions--assessment of student competencies and assessment of what curricula do to develop these competencies. It will provide an index of outcomes rather than one absolute meansurement.

Each portfolio will normally contain ten items. Contents will generally be limited to ten items due to handling and storage concerns. The items to be included are the prompted and reflective essays from the three writing assessment sessions, a math pre-test and post-test, results of the CAAP general information test, three samples of writing from writing intensive courses which the students designate as their best writing, and four representative samples of written work from the student's major department, all of which are accompanied by the applicable assignment sheets to indicate a context for the writing, and student reflections upon their writing and thinking processes. Later on in the student's career, an employment interviewer survey and an alumni survey

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will be added to each student's portfolio. These items were chosen to provide a representative sample keyed to the College mission statement requirements which I mentioned earlier.

The portfolio assessment begins with a random sample of fifty incoming freshmen. Each subsequent year, another random sample of fifty freshmen students will be added. By the fourth year of the program, the total sample size will be less than 200 students, due to attrition. The items in the portfolio will be collected once a year on the spring assessment day.

The completed portfolios will be evaluated using a process similar to that employed for the writing assessments. Faculty will receive training in a series of portfolio evaluation workshops. Trained faculty volunteers will then meet to read and evaluate the completed portfolios using a descriptive feature grid. A code system is used to provide confidentiality. Faculty readers for this session are compensated at the rate of $30 per hour. Each portfolio will be kept on file for ten years to allow the Office of Career Planning and Placement to monitor the progress of Westminster graduates. This follow-up information will be used to improve the level of academic preparation via academic curricula and the placement program services.

III. Departmental Assessments

Departmental assessment plans employ a broad selection of assessment activities, ranging from departmental portfolios to case studies to senior capstone projects. Departments worked collaboratively, using a format suggested by the Assessment Committee, to reflect upon and develop these assessment plans.

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I believe these are essential questions for departments to use as prompts to articulate the theoretical assumptions which underlie practice.

IV. Informational Support Assessment

The informational support assessment consists of the collection of interviews with students in the portfolio sample and all faculty at the end of each academic year regarding their educational experiences to obtain their perspectives on the value of writing instruction, and collection of faculty syllabi, all of which is intended to provide us with a more precise picture of the kinds of writing students engage in, how writing demands vary from disicpline to discipline, the attitudes of students and faculty toward various kinds of formal and informal writing tasks, the philosophical, pedegogical, and theoretical approaches which underlie the faculty's use of writing, and how writing may influence what students learn and retain. Faculty at Westminster also write annual self-report narratives on their teaching, scholarship, and service to the academic community. The teaching sections of these reports may also serve as valuable documentation of faculty self-reflection on theoretical and pedagogical assumptions and their translation into teaching practice.

We project that the Westminster Writing Assessment Program will elicit meaningful measures of writing as a complex, multifaceted activity which takes place in our small college environment. We hope that our findings promote continued attention to curricular coherence and increased recognition of the value of and the distinctive uses for writing at the small college level.

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WESTMINSTER WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
EVALUATIVE SCHEMA

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1. The writing curriculum should promote the goals set forth in the mission statement of the College, which asserts that "it is essential for the educated individual to be able to read critically, to think logically, to judge objectively, to discern relationships, and to express thoughts clearly and cogently."

2. The writing curriculum structure should be developmentally sequenced to expose students to a systematic means of learning the activities of thinking and writing.

3. The writing curriculum should reinforce the interdisciplinary content of the liberal arts by promoting meaningful inquiry and discovery.

4. The writing curriculum should be based upon coherent theories of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

5. The writing curriculum should emphasize summary, synthesis, analysis, and argumentation as essential approaches to comprehend and express one's thoughts and experiences.

RATIONALE FOR PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

1. A portfolio will contain more texts, thereby providing more evidence and therefore a broader basis for accurate and equitable judgement of student writing than a single writing assessment could provide.

2. A portfolio includes texts of more than one type. A variety of texts will lead to a broader basis for making judgements regarding student writing and the learning it reflects. Such a variety of texts also permits the evaluator an opportunity to incorporate student reflection on the writing and learning processes into the evaluation process.

3. A portfolio will allow ease and consistency of monitoring the development of a student's writing and his or her ability to improve the quality of the writing. Each portfolio thus represents the range and quality of individual student writing.

4. A portfolio allows both instructors and evaluators to take into account pedagogical and curricular values more directly by means of the type and range of texts we choose to collect and by the patterns we look for in those texts.

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R. Blair/Small College Assessment/CCCC, 1994

5. Portfolio assessment will aid in building consensus among faculty within and across disciplines regarding writing instruction and assessment. The portfolio method will serve multiple functions--assessment of student competencies and assessment of what curricula do to develop these competencies. It will provide an index of outcomes.

DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT PLANS:
SUGGESTED GUIDELINES

1. Departmental mission statement:
   a. What is the purpose of the department?
   b. How do the departmental goals and curricula fit into the Westminster College mission statement?

2. Statement of specific objectives:
   a. What student accomplishments will indicate that the department has satisfactorily and completely fulfilled the purpose as stated above?
   b. Which accomplishments have high and low priorities?

3. Measurement of objectives:
   a. What assessment instruments will work best to measure the goals set for the department?
   b. How will the department use the results?

4. Student sample:
   a. Should only seniors within the major be assessed?
   b. Should a random sampling of students who take service and/or major courses within the department be assessed?

5. Assessment times:
   a. What are the critical points in the student's career at which he/she should have reached certain objectives within the discipline?
   b. How are students helped who have not reached these objectives?
   c. With what class or academic year will the assessment begin and why?

6. Future plans:
   a. Do you foresee the need for more assessment measures? What might be the purpose for and design of such measures?
   b. Do you foresee the need to develop new courses to meet the department's future instructional goals? If so, how would you describe such courses? How would they fit into the current curricula/the department's view of the discipline?

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WESTMINSTER WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
DESCRIPTIVE FEATURES GRID

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FEATURES	✓ to confirm	Comments
The writing establishes a clear sense of purpose. The purpose is clearly identifiable in the text.		
The writing establishes a clear sense of audience. The audience is clearly identifiable after a reading of the text.		
The writing develops a clear thesis (direct or implied).		
The writing consistently maintains the focus established by the thesis.		
The writing addresses the topic of the paper in a fresh, original manner.		
The writing displays a clear organizational plan.		
The topic sentences of most paragraphs are directly supported by relevant detail within the paragraphs.		
The thesis is directly supported by relevant points in most paragraphs.		
The writing incorporates appropriate evidence to support a series of points.		

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The writing contains syntactic structures appropriate to the complexity of the presentation (subordination, coordination, transition, etc.)		
The conclusion effectively and completely closes the analysis or explanation carried out in the paper.		
The paper contains word choice that is appropriate to the subject, purpose, and audience.		
The tone of the paper is appropriate to the subject, purpose, and audience.		
On the whole, the writing is mechanically correct.		
On the whole, the writing is grammatically correct.		
Other notable features:		

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